

# Thoughts about Remaking the Heartland

by Robert Wuthnow

*Editor's Note: "Tread[ing] the line between history and social science," Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow looks at his native Midwest in this excerpt from his book Remaking the American Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s.*

**I**t may have been that cold windy morning in central Nebraska when I pulled off the highway to watch the sun rise, golden red, across the open fields. That may have been the day I decided to write this book. Or it may have been another day, when I was driving through small towns in eastern Iowa. That moment, perhaps, when a highway marker reminded me of my childhood home. Or it may have been only the slow realization that something there in the nation's heartland was calling me to write about it. Who knows?

What I do recall as vividly as if it were yesterday is listening to a public lecture by a visiting speaker at my university, my mind wandering as it often does, and

realizing that I had it all wrong. Well into the research at that point, I was working on the assumption that the heartland was a place of withering decline, like the soil itself gradually eroding away. I thought that was the story that needed to be told. It made sense of small towns with empty storefronts. Large fields with no farmsteads. Reports of joblessness. But it did not square with other evidence. New technology. A surprisingly robust economy. Strong schools. An upbeat feeling among residents about the future. Clearly I needed to think harder about what was happening. By the time I finished with the research, I had a much different story in mind than when I started.

My central claim is that the American Middle West has undergone a strong, positive transformation since the 1950s. The reshaping that occurred in this period is striking because the region was worse off in the years immediately following World War II than has commonly been assumed. The transformation is surprising because it took place in the nation's heartland.



Most accounts of dramatic social change have focused on other parts of the country—especially the Sunbelt and coastal cities—not on the Middle West, a region of small towns and farms, wheat fields and prairies. The transformation that occurred here was largely beneficial, notwithstanding the fact that millions of people were displaced from their communities, because this displacement resulted in new opportunities for employment and a healthier relationship between the region and the rest of the nation. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Middle West was a more vibrant contributor to the national economy than it had been a half century earlier.

This argument, I confess, is counterintuitive. The typical approach is to regard the American Middle West as a kind of throwback to earlier times, a vast museum of dwindling farms and small towns to be visited by folks who live elsewhere and would not want to stay for very long. The view that things were better in the past fits neatly with a nostalgic image of an America that was in fact rural and less complicated than it is today. A related view popularized in news magazines and schoolbooks showed a heartland in the 1950s prospering from good crops, with happy housewives preparing luscious meals on modern kitchen appliances for grateful husbands and children—a time followed by disappointment and decline. That image of the 1950s may have been true for the few but not for the many. A better sense of how the Middle West has changed over the past five or six decades is gained by thinking of the 1950s as a time when many families were still recovering from the Great Depression. Farmers were again suffering from dust storms, uncertain crops, and wildly fluctuating prices. Farm communities often lacked paved roads, electricity, or dependable telephone service. Millions of people were leaving the farms and rural communities in search of meager employment opportunities elsewhere.

It is also counterintuitive to argue that the Middle West is vibrant economically and culturally. Most depictions of the region's recent history view it as a sad tale of rural people clinging to outmoded lives, of dying communities, and of old-fashioned values tinged with bigotry and ignorance. When writers who pass briefly through the region find other stories to tell, the stories are usually about food the writers romantically wished was still grown in the family garden, smelly feedlots, or undocumented workers being exploited by rich agribusiness owners who reap unjustified millions in government subsidies. But these accounts miss the fact that the region has upgraded itself even as it has downsized. The technology, the new industries, and

the cultural diversity of the heartland could hardly have been imagined a half century ago.

The transformation that has occurred in the American Middle West cannot be attributed to any single cause, tempting as it may be to seek answers in the magic of, say, rugged individualism. I break the narrative [of my book] into several parts. The first is about the struggles of Middle Western farmers in the 1950s. Difficult as those struggles were, they enabled farming to become more efficient and capital intensive. The second is a saga of cultural redefinition. As the Middle West modernized, it rediscovered its legends of hardy pioneers, adventuresome cowboys, and Dust Bowl survivors. It reshaped these legends into a less spatially confined image of congeniality and can-do inventiveness. These new understandings improved the region's self-image and contributed to its ability to transform itself. A third story is about public education. The region invested heavily in schools, administered them well, and encouraged children to regard school achievement as their best hope for occupational success. Higher education became the source of both upward and outward mobility. A fourth story tells of small communities that are dying by the hundreds and yet are not doing so

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very quickly or completely. Community downsizing has been a matter of great concern to the residents of these communities, but it has worked remarkably well for the region as a whole. Small communities remain attractive for low-income families needing inexpensive housing. Many of these communities are within commuting distance of larger towns where work can be found in construction, manufacturing, and human services. High fuel prices are making it harder for these commuters, but electronic technology and decentralization are opening new opportunities. A fifth story examines the growth of large-scale agribusiness and its effects on the ethnic composition of the region. Contrary to tales about extreme ethnic conflicts, the picture that comes into focus from closer inspection is one of greater diversity over a longer period, continuing difficulties for immigrants



and undocumented workers, and yet shows a striking degree of community-wide accommodation to new realities. A final story is about the phenomenon least expected in this part of the country—rapidly expanding edge cities. The growth of these communities has been nothing short of spectacular. And yet the sources of this growth lie in more than simply the availability of land and the decline of smaller towns.

My approach treads the line between history and social science. Change in the heartland is a big topic that can only be grasped by delving deeply into the lives of particular communities, looking at their past, learning from their current residents, and situating these communities in wider comparisons. Much of the change resides in small details that can only be seen in the trajectories of children leaving, stores closing, citizens remembering dust storms and taking pride in their ancestors, neighbors watching out for one another, schools consolidating, residents looking for new jobs, and planners planning. The Middle West is enormously diverse in both its geography and its people. The diversity makes for interesting comparisons. Missouri and Arkansas developed schools quite differently than Iowa and Minnesota. Farming diverged sharply between the grasslands of western Nebraska and the wheat fields of western Kansas. The evidence for these comparisons comes from data on population, crops, schools, and economic condi-

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tions; information about the growth and decline of towns and about their business conditions; records of town meetings and planning boards; diaries and newspaper stories; and interviews with more than two hundred residents about farming, school administration, town and county government, agribusiness, and regional planning.

Although no single factor can explain the region's transformation, several preconditions for the social change that has taken place loom large. One is the fact that the region largely comprised rich land with vast potential for crops and livestock and often mineral wealth as well. The region was essentially taken from

its native inhabitants and used by the United States for colonization by white settlers, who in turn raised crops and livestock, created a demand for towns and railroads, and for years existed as debtors to eastern banks. During the last half of the twentieth century, the land continued to be a crucial aspect of the region's social life, shaping the location and livelihood of towns, influencing the establishment of agribusiness, providing funds for public schools, and encouraging the development of military and transportation industries. Another precondition may have been less obvious. That was the extensive geographic mobility of the region's first several generations of white settlers. Settlement implied people coming to stay, and those who did were often hailed as community founders. But they were the exception rather than the rule. Settlers were people who had lived elsewhere before, often in several places, and although they may have wished to stay in one place, they moved on in hopes of something better. They seldom objected when their children packed up to attend college or to marry and find jobs in other towns or states. That adaptability made it possible for the region's population to disperse as economic conditions warranted. A third precondition was the institution building carried out by the region's first century of settlers. They came as merchants and schoolteachers, with skills in business and law and with knowledge of shops and offices. The region benefited from carefully crafted laws, town and county governments, school districts, and state constitutions that had been worked out previously in other parts of the country. The smallest towns soon had churches, Masonic lodges, opera houses, and schools. Despite an ethic of self-sufficiency, residents worked out programs to care for the needy and established asylums for the blind and the insane. All of these institutional precedents served as resources when the time came to consider new schools, new jobs, and new programs of government assistance.

The danger in writing about a place in which one lived as a child is the possibility of either romanticizing it or viewing it too harshly. To guard against these tendencies, I tried to employ the same mind-set an academic writer would adopt for any other topic. I read countless memoirs to see how other writers have dealt with the issue. Unlike some, I am not so glad to have escaped the Middle West that I hold it in disdain; and unlike others, I have never been much tempted by pangs of regret. As the research progressed, I was surprised to find myself telling an upbeat story. That focus, however, in no way diminishes the difficulties communities face when their populations decline.



**D**own the sanded country road, past an overgrown hedge row and an unused pasture, just beyond a small rise a quarter of a mile from where I grew up, stands an abandoned farmhouse owned by our closest neighbors, the Morganfields, before they retired in the late 1950s. The shabby frame house, nearly obscured by tall prairie grass and weeds, has turned a weathered gray. None of the windows are intact. Tenants made it their home for a few years, and squatters for a few more after that. A sagging shed that served well in its time as a chicken coop remains, but the grand red barn where fat roan cows once came to be milked has collapsed. A quarter mile to the south where the Bains, an enterprising young farm family, lived, nothing exists but a clump of trees and the outline of the house's and barn's foundations. After they quit farming, Mr. and Mrs. Bain lived in town for a few years and died one day when a truck careened into their car. A half mile beyond their former house is the remnant of the old Wilms place, which burned to the ground after being struck by lightning. A half mile to the north is where the Staffords lived, until a teenager stole his father's rifle one night and shot Mr. Stafford in the head through the kitchen window.

The farmhouse I grew up in fared a little better than any of its neighbors. Called Sunny Crest Farm by its original owners, it was solidly constructed in 1911, but after several subsequent families lived there, including one whose son committed suicide in the garage and another that lost everything during the Great Depression, it was in disrepair by the time my parents bought it in 1952. My mother sold it shortly after my father died in 1965. The new owners kept it for several years as a place to raise dogs and then sold it to a man who used it to salvage parts from wrecked vehicles that soon surrounded the house and decaying outbuildings.

The small farmhouse we occupied before that was three and a half miles away. My parents bought it in 1945 when my father came home from World War II. They invested their savings and poured their energy into fixing it up, installing indoor plumbing and electricity, planting hundreds of trees and a garden, and repairing the barn and shed. In 1951, the state condemned the property to build a highway. A year later, our house was gone. I visited the site a few years ago. In the ditch under a layer of dead weeds was a roll of barbed wire my father had used to put up a fence. No other sign of his work remained.

On that trip, I drove the two strikingly familiar miles into town where my parents bought groceries at Suchland's store and banked at the tall brick building on the corner and where I attended grade school.

The grade school building was new in the late 1940s, and a large basketball gymnasium was added in 1958. In those years, more than a hundred children went to the school and about six hundred people lived in the town. Times were hard for us but even harder for the families of many people who had come as section hands for the railroad and to work in the oil fields or on the farms. My friend Jimmy lived with his family in a dugout cut into the side of a hill, surviving mostly on fifty-pound bags of peanuts during the long winter

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his father was laid up with a broken leg. Galen lived in a drafty, unpainted ramshackle house next to the railroad track with plastic nailed over the windows and practically no furniture. Diane carried deep scars from the night she was dragged out of the upstairs window of her burning house. By the end of the century, the school was boarded up and the town's population had dropped by two-thirds.

**I** grew up believing I would spend my life in the Middle West, probably farming the small plot of land my father owned and where I drove a tractor every summer until I was eighteen, and probably supplementing my income by teaching school, like my mother did, or doing bookkeeping and tax returns, which was one of the few professions available in a county seat of fewer than four thousand people. My father's death from a massive heart attack when I was a freshman in college altered those plans and eventually led me to graduate school and a very different life than the one I had imagined. Perhaps because I had expected to stay, and perhaps because I had known it as my home, I held a strong attachment to the Middle West even though I no longer lived there. But unlike writers who remain attached to their places of origin through family and friends, I had no such continuing connections. Nor did the heavy routine demands of work and family make it possible to return except on rare occasions. When I did return, there were the ghost memories of people who no longer existed and the strangeness of realities that had taken their place. Understanding



how the Middle West had changed was the aim that impelled me to write this book.

The journey began with several lengthy road trips through the Middle West, driving thousands of miles along back roads and highways through small country towns and the region's larger cities. I talked to strangers at gas stations and restaurants, visited places I had heard about as a child, and looked up cousins I had not seen in years. I found the farm my German great-grandfather purchased in 1878 and his grave in the cemetery on land the railroad company gave to his neighbors. I located the farm my great-grandfather from West Virginia bought in 1870 and visited his unmarked grave at the state insane asylum where he spent the last twenty years of his life suffering from trauma inflicted by the Civil War. My travels took me onto an interstate built through the slum neighborhood where his widow ran a boardinghouse and through the cities where my grandmother worked as a stenographer and my mother taught school. I learned how little I knew about the region, despite having studied its history in school and having considered it home. But one lesson from my childhood was reaffirmed: if an outsider asked where you were from, you replied simply that you were from the Midwest, and if a Midwesterner asked, you probably said proudly that you were from Kansas or Nebraska or Iowa or Missouri; but your real identity was your hometown. Small or large, your home community was what you knew. It was Main Street, the streets and shops you knew,

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the school you attended, its mascot, its football field, the park, the favorite swimming hole, the doughnut shop where friends gathered, the church where funerals were held, the place where people knew your name.

I determined that whatever I might be able to learn about the Middle West as a region of the country, I had to be true to that realization about the importance of communities. I opted for what we sociologists call a

multimethod research design. It would combine statistical data about individuals, towns, and counties with qualitative information about local histories, events, and perceptions drawn from interviews, observations, and publications. I also knew that I would have to write as an outsider. However much I might identify with the communities I studied, it was not possible to

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know them the way insiders did. And yet there is an advantage in approaching subject matter with which one is not intimately familiar. Had I never left the Middle West, it likely would not have occurred to me to write about it at all. My audience would be people like myself who did not live there, who may have had relatives who did, and who most likely regarded the Middle West as a large blank space between the excitement of the nation's coasts.

I had never been to Lebanon, Kansas, or Smith Center until one of my research trips took me there. They were enough like my home community that I felt it possible to understand them. They had the further good fortune of having been visited and written about enough by outsiders that impressions of their history could be pieced together. Putting their stories together with statistical evidence gave me a different picture of the rural Middle West in the 1950s than anything I had read in standard accounts. The story in those accounts was of hard times during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, good times during World War II at least for those who stayed home, and even better times in the 1950s. That story fit some of what I grew up hearing my parents tell, but not all. I knew they had waited until the Depression was over to marry and that my father had worked as a farm laborer for a dollar a day in the 1930s. The part about later prosperity did not square with my parents' income of only a thousand dollars a year in the early 1950s or with the struggles of so many of our neighbors. The statistical evidence revealed that our experience was not unique. Recovery from the Great Depression lasted well into the 1950s. Farmers with luck enough to have purchased cheap land at the right time, to have struck oil, or to have had wealthy relatives did well. Tens of thousands of farmers did not. The decade after World War II was difficult



for nearly everyone. Roads, electricity, telephone service, and machinery had all been put on hold by the Depression and the war. Marginal farmers were unable to make the transition. They did not have the capital to purchase additional land, to mechanize, or to invest in livestock. Ultimately, their failure nevertheless served the region and the nation. Farming became better capitalized and more efficient as a result.

**A** sociological truism is that in unsettled times, people tell stories to make sense of what they are experiencing. The trouble with this truism is that all times are, in their particular ways, unsettled. Certainly the Middle West was unsettled even in the nineteenth century when it was being, in a different sense of the word, settled. It was unsettled in the 1930s by the dust storms and in the 1940s by the war. Yet as I read stories of people growing up in the 1950s, pondered their accounts in interviews, and looked through old newspapers and magazines, I was struck that the Middle West was going through a transition that was as much cultural as economic or demographic. The old stories of cowboys and Indians, pioneers, and Dust Bowl survivors were being told, but with different meanings. The heartland was redefining itself, seeking to offset the country-bumpkin images still present in the mainstream press, and aiming to demonstrate that it was as modern as anywhere else while preserving some of its distinctive identity. A region's self-image is always in flux, but I believe the Middle West's emphasis on friendliness, hospitality, and native ingenuity owes much to the redefinition of its heritage that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s.

In seeking factors facilitating the Middle West's economic growth during the last half of the twentieth century, I was most surprised by the strength of its historic emphasis on education. I grew up believing that my parents valued education because my father's had stopped in eighth grade and my mother was in her fifties before she earned a college degree. By a truly unusual confluence of events, I wound up as an adult among people who traced their ancestry to graduates of elite colleges for five to ten generations and had little use for those who could not. But the Middle West was remarkably successful in bringing the cherished ideals of democratic education—of schooling for all—into reality. It became the education belt, with a strong system of primary and secondary education that prepared its children well for the challenges they faced on farms and in small towns, and it was on that basis that the

region established the colleges and universities that became instrumental in its subsequent economic development.

My surprise in researching the decline of small communities was not that so many were losing population but that there was as much optimism and as robust a sense of community present in the ones that remained. This is not to suggest that things are going well in the region's smallest communities. In town after town, I was struck by the numerous houses that were in ill repair, by the families living in an abandoned schoolhouse they had fixed up as a home or in an aging trailer home, by the boarded-up stores and shops with no customers, by the churches no longer in use, and by the ancient pickup trucks and rusted automobiles. The smallest towns have become places where the elderly poor still reside and where younger families with meager incomes have sought refuge because it was all they could afford. The larger towns with even three thousand to five thousand residents, though, are doing better. The school very likely has fewer children than it did a few years ago, but it is probably the newest building in town and serves as a community center. A small manufacturing plant may keep some of the residents employed as others commute to larger towns twenty or thirty miles away. As long as fuel prices do not rise exorbitantly, these communities provide attractive locations for their residents.

The small communities were part of a regional

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network of railroads from almost the start, and they are more nearly woven together now than ever before by paved highways and trucking companies. Residents shop at Walmart for goods imported from China, order supplies online, and are connected in the remotest areas by cell phone. The agricultural cooperatives of the early twentieth century have expanded in geographic scope and product lines. Agribusiness has simply evolved to make better use of the decentralization that these modes of communication provide. The meat-processing industry is the part of agribusiness that has attracted the greatest attention, not only because of concerns about pack-



aged meals in fast-food chains, but also because of questions about human-rights violations, immigrant labor, and ethnic tensions. Like other researchers, I was drawn to Garden City because of its prominence as a meat-processing center. But I came away impressed by the community's institutions as much as by the challenges it faced. Garden City was adapting to the growth, immigration, ethnic diversity, and economic uncertainties it experienced.

**I** saved the cities and suburbs until last, even though that is where the region's population is increasingly located, because the story of suburban growth is in many respects least characteristic of the Middle West. It is a story that researchers for many years have tracked near New York City, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Houston, Phoenix, and similar locations in the Sunbelt and on the coasts. Residents in the Middle West's edge cities informed me in no uncertain terms that it was not unusual at all to find populous suburbs in the region, and yet there is a history to these communities that residents who may have lived there only a few years do not always appreciate. Olathe and other communities in Johnson County, Kansas, are places where dramatic growth is a way of life and is expected to continue for decades to come. Olathe is also where one of my great-grandfathers settled shortly after the

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Civil War, where my mother was born, near where she returned to teach school in the late 1930s, where my wife's father was a pastor in the 1940s, and near where my wife was born. Olathe's growth in the twenty-first century is continuous with its history in those earlier decades. It, like other edge cities, has taken the place of farms, but it has long depended on its adjacency to one of the region's largest urban centers and has developed not only as a bedroom community but also because of military installations, entrepreneurial manufacturing and distribution firms, and investments in education and technology.

**T**he remaking of a region is evident in more ways than I have been able to describe here. Thirty miles from where I was raised, a massive wind farm has emerged with more than a hundred towering machines that produce energy free of ill effects to the environment. Nearby is a new ethanol plant that has weathered uncertain government policies and is bringing new jobs to the area. My hometown recently celebrated the construction of a new hospital that dramatically improves its medical capabilities. There is a small industrial park and a new community center. At the high school, where nearly 100 percent of the students used to be white Anglos, 30 percent are now Hispanic.

Sociologists sometimes pride themselves on studies that seize on one aspect of social life, such as class differences or the role of the state, and claim to explain everything else in relation to that aspect. I confess to never having found such studies appealing. Communities are too complex to be understood that way. The remaking of the Middle West has happened because of disparate developments in agriculture, culture, education, towns, and business. In popular accounts, a common thread in these developments is the region's emphasis on rugged individualism. Even now, many of the people I spoke to insisted that things would be better if they were simply left alone. They had little use for government intervention or regulation, especially if that meant the federal government. And yet the single theme that runs through so much of what I have described is the hand of government. Ordinary citizens may have chafed at government's role in subsidizing the railroads or commandeering land for munitions plants, but they were as often as not the beneficiaries of government planning as well.

That, though, is a lesson that probably speaks more to me than to anyone else. For I was the one who, as a five-year-old, protesting in my small way against government intrusion, committed my first act of civil disobedience by pulling up each of the orange-topped stakes the transportation department's surveyors placed on our property to mark where they planned to construct the highway through our home. ❖

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